

Business as usual — almost

Business owners say
patience has been
key to street project

INSIDE:
Businesses
along
Caledonia
Street, a
block east
of Rose
Street,
have
experi-
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little
impact
from the
road
project.
But the
Caledonia
Street
merchants
are facing
a recon-
struction
project of
their own.
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By Ken Brekke
Special to the Enterpriser

Most of the people involved with the reconstruction of Rose Street agree that the summer-long project has not been as terrible as they had feared.

They don't agree on the reasons for that pleasant development, but they're delighted it has happened, and hope it continues.

Patience has been a key. Most drivers have been patient with the delays that have been occurring along Rose Street between Windsor and Livingston streets. Business owners along that stretch also have been patient with the mess that necessarily precedes the arrival of new streets and sidewalks. Their customers also have been generally accepted both the delays and mess, and as a result business has declined only slightly — if at all — along the route of the \$3.6 million project.

Maybe credit for the good-natured approach to the project should go to all those signs along the route that encourage everyone to smile.

■ "Smile — construction is only 7 blocks," reads the sign outside Edward's Pizza Wagon, 1930 Rose St.

■ More encouragement awaits on the nearby smiley-faced billboard outside the Best Western Midway Hotel, 1835 Rose St.



La Crosse Tribune file photos

SMILE signs are just one of the ways workers and merchants along Rose Street have tried to help make the road construction a more positive experience. Dave Clements, below, said the Super 8's sign, counting down the days of the project, has been popular.

"Road open all summer - only 7 blocks to go," it says.

■ A sign outside Super 8 of La Crosse, 1625 Rose St., is counting down the days until reconstruction is complete. "Smile, (number) days left of road project," it reports.

Dave Clements, Super 8's general manager, said the original intent was just to change the sign once a week. But the posting, which started at about 150 days, proved to be popular. The same question kept being repeated to Clements wherever he went: "What's the count at today?" So the number will be changed every day until the project's completion, which is scheduled for the end of September.

The impact of the reconstruction project "hasn't been as bad as we thought," Clements said. "Business has been pretty much normal." This spring's high water levels and a nationwide economic slowdown probably have caused more problems for the lodging industry than the roadwork outside

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At a glance

- The Rose Street project includes adding center turn lanes, new storm sewers and water mains and decorative streetscaping featuring new lighting, trees and tinted concrete for pedestrian crosswalks. Lanes also are being widened and intersections are being improved.
- The 50-year-old road is a major artery between downtown La Crosse and I-90, and it had an accident rate nearly twice the state average. The \$3.6 million project is being financed with federal, state and local funds, including a \$1.3 million federal safety grant.
- The paving portion of the work is to be completed by Sept. 28, and other details are to be done by Oct. 12.

Rose Street

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La Crosse's Super 8, Clements said.

"We've taken a positive approach, a smiley approach," to the project, Clements added. "We've said: 'Let's get this done, and let's work together.'" The team of drivers, business owners, construction workers, city officials and transportation department supervisors includes "many wonderful people," Clements said. "Things have been moving pretty smoothly. It's even fun to watch traffic. There are a lot of polite drivers, which is very heartening."

Clements admitted he is in an even better mood these days, because a new lane opened a couple of weeks ago on his side of Rose Street. That improved the access to his business, and traffic is flowing a bit better on the street.

Actually, perhaps the most bothersome aspect of the whole project, for a few businesses, occurred before roadwork began. The Super 8 was among those buildings that had to be shaved off to make room for a wider Rose Street. Those renovations generally were completed before the roadwork began.

The Super 8 lost about eight feet off the front of its swimming pool area, Clements said. The whirlpool that used to sit there had to be relocated, a process that took it out of commission for about 10 weeks. "That cost us some business," Clements admitted.

Business at Edwardo's Pizza Wagon "has held strong, and we're thankful," said owner Tod Edwards. "We've been nice and busy," he said, "and our customers aren't complaining" about the roadwork. He admitted to being worried about the road project's impact before it began, "but so far it's been an easy experience."

Edwards credited good planning and a spirit of cooperation for making the project more of a pleasant experience. "We all got together a couple of years before it started," he recalled. Business owners, contractors, city officials and transportation department managers "have gotten together and made it work," he said. "We've all gotten to be friends."

That could pay dividends in the future when cooperation might be needed on other projects, Edwards said. Long-term benefits that have nothing to do with concrete, like joint promotions that could aid all the businesses along Rose Street, might grow from the relationships developed during the road construction, he explained.

Edwards praised the project's prime contractor, Harry Viner Inc. of La Crosse, for "keeping the lanes open" and being "fantastic

to work with." He also applauded the "positive approach" and help offered by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the La Crosse Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The key to things working out well also may be the simple fact that the project only involves a few blocks. "The distance is not very long, and it's easy to drive through," Edwards said. In fact, it might be easier to pass through now, during construction, than before the project started, he said. Some drivers are taking alternative routes, so traffic has been lessened a bit, and the new road, though only slightly more than half done, is smoother and less obstructed than the bumpy stretch of highway it is replacing, Edwards said.

A computer-generated vision of what the completed road will be like stands in the showroom at A-1 Glass Co., 1605 Rose St., and Kim Wiegand said that looking at what the road will be like makes it easier to stomach the mess that has been visible through the company's front windows.



Wiegand, customer service representative for A-1 Glass, has had a good view of the project from her desk near the company's showroom, which faces Rose Street. She said the finished product "will definitely be worth" enduring the construction phase, but she also said she has observed some problems, like frustrated drivers leaning out the windows of their vehicles and cursing at other motorists. That kind of behavior is especially noticeable during the morning, noon and late-afternoon rush hours, she said.

However, Wiegand said A-1 Glass hasn't had to field many complaints from its customers, even though they've had to wade through a jumble of sand and rubble to get to the company's front door. It has helped that the business conducts most of its repair

services at customer sites, rather than in its Rose Street building.

A-1 Glass also lost several feet of its building to the road-widening project, but Wiegand said that also hasn't been too much of a hardship. The company's showroom is smaller now, but there still is room for that picture of what is coming.

The former Tasca Ward Tire business, 1751 Rose St., also lost a chunk of its space to the expanded road, and owners decided it would be better to relocate rather than try to conduct business on its reduced site. That turned out to be a benefit for those coordinating the road project, because they are using the old Tasca Ward building as a grander-than-normal headquarters.

"Usually we just have a little trailer pulled onto the site," explained Dan Kleinertz, manager of the Rose Street project for the transportation department's La Crosse office. The Tasca Ward building offers office space, storage areas and a large conference room where Kleinertz has been conducting meetings every Tuesday since the project began.

"I'm working directly with the business owners myself," he said, "and about 90 percent of the people involved are cooperative." Those hour-long meetings on Tuesdays also involve city officials, the main contractor and subcontractors, in addition to the business owners and transportation department representatives. A lot of problems have been peacefully solved at the meetings, Kleinertz said.

OK, not everything has been perfect, he admitted. There have been several fender-bender accidents along the route, and on the day Kleinertz was interviewed, workers had punctured a city water line and flooded a nearby building. But these types of incidents almost are expected on a large project.

Dry weather has been an advantage for the construction workers, because concrete work has gone on without a hitch. And the mid-July opening of a new lane has meant a nicer ride and faster trip for commuters. "Driver are going faster," Kleinertz said, although he has some safety concerns about that fact. "They don't realize they're going faster, and that makes things a little more dangerous."

Motorists are starting to be able to see where trees will be planted. Decorative brick-red crosswalks and center-turn-lanes, made of tinted concrete, are being installed. Kleinertz said he has been getting compliments about the appearance of the new Rose Street.

Businesses along Caledonia Street, which runs just a block east of Rose Street, have experienced little impact from the nearby construction, according to the head of the local merchants organization.

If anything, Sue Sullivan said, construction on Rose Street may have been good for businesses along Caledonia Street. "More La Crosse people have been taking Caledonia, and they've been discovering us. The tourists have been coming anyway."

Sullivan owns TLC Antiques, 1233 Caledonia St., and is president of the Old Towne North Merchants Association, which used to be called the Caledonia Street Merchants Association.

Owners of those businesses have been supporting the merchants along Rose Street, and donated a sizable sum toward advertising aimed at keeping customers coming to La Crosse's North Side.

The Caledonia Street merchants also are facing a reconstruction project of their own.

New sidewalks are being installed in the Old Towne section, extending south from Clinton Street for slightly more than two blocks. Traffic will be able to pass through on Caledonia, but there will be no on-street parking available.

Both projects are scheduled for completion at the same time. "We chose to do it all at once and be done with it," said Randy Eddy, former president of the Old Towne Merchants Association. Eddy, who owns an insurance business based on Caledonia Street, says he "walks the block daily" and hasn't noticed any impact so far from the Rose Street work.

Sullivan said new sidewalks will be especially welcome along Caledonia Street. "I'm tired of pulling weeds from the cracks" in the old concrete, she explained. The new sidewalk scheme, which will include planters in various spots along both Caledonia and Clinton streets, "is going to look really nice," she said.

She also said it will be imperative for crews to finish both projects before Oktoberfest arrives. The Maple Leaf Parade lines up on the North Side, she pointed out, and the Torchlight Parade comes right down Caledonia Street. "We don't want to lose that," Sullivan warned.